The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune
Boston Globe - 15
Date 15 Oct 1988

Hiding the truth at the CIA

HISTORY LOOKS AHEAD | THOMAS BOYLSTON ADAMS

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Incidents in the building of the house of cards that became the Bay of Pigs disaster give clues to answer the question, "How much did George Bush know about Iran-gate and when did he know it?"

In the fall of 1960 the plot to overthrow Castro was overripe in Guatemala. The Cuban exiles training as guerrillas were mutinous. Stories about their isolated camp were being published in Spanish-language newspapers. Someone was talking.

President Ydigoras of Guatemala came right to the point with his friend Robert Davis of the CIA. He said he enjoyed the generous flow of US funds, but hospitality had its drawbacks. His army was kept busy rounding up Cubans who were AWOL.

"It's women," he said. "I don't blame them. They'll go 1,000 miles for a woman. There's no telling what they tell the girls. Something has to be done."

A few days later, Davis, at dinner in Washington with Richard Bissell, operations officer of the CIA, and his deputy Tracy Barnes, broached the subject. "I got one big problem with the president." "What?" asked Barnes. "Well, frankly, women." Davis leaned forward and drew a deep breath. "We've got to get some – you know what – and put them down near the base. The nearest supply is too far off."

Barnes was a gentleman, as likable as he was brave. He had no taste for Mrs. Warren's profession. He got up from the table saying, "You can't do that. You can't use American taxpayers' money for anything like that." Then he left the room.

Bissell said, "I don't want to hear any more about it. Your job is to get things done down there."

Davis returned to Guatemala and talked to Ydigoras, who later remarked casually, "It's done."

The Cubans stopped going AWOL. Another obscure item was buried in the $13,000,000 CIA expense account – something on the order of cots and mattresses for trainees. The rest was silence.

Barnes was a past master of obscurantism. He was dispatched early in April 1961 to brief Adlai Stevenson, US ambassador to the United Nations, on what might be happening in Cuba. Arthur Schlesinger, confidant of President Kennedy and longtime friend of Stevenson, was chosen to go with him.

At a meeting in the Cabinet Room, Kennedy had stated that he wished Stevenson to be fully informed and that nothing said at the UN should be less than the truth, even if it could not be the full truth. In a parting word to Schlesinger, he said, "The integrity and credibility of Adlai Stevenson constitute one of our great national assets. I don't want anything done that might jeopardize that."

What happened to the integrity and credibility of Stevenson was a massacre only comparable to the destruction of the foreign policy of President Eisenhower by the CIA's clumsy handling of the U2 affair.

In the words of Schlesinger, "Tracy Barnes and I held a long talk with Stevenson. But our briefing, which was probably unduly vague, left Stevenson with the impression that no action would take place during the UN discussion of the Cuban item."

Schlesinger was new at his job. He had not yet grasped the rule of dishonesty that governed the CIA. "The need to know" determined who should be told what. CIA operatives did not discuss the projects in which they were engaged with each other or anybody else unless that person was necessary to the success of the project. The effect was to keep in the dark even the highest officials of government.

CIA propaganda artist David Phillips, watching Stevenson reply at the UN to Cuban accusations about the Bay of Pigs, had never believed Stevenson could be such an accomplished liar. He heard him insist that bullet-riddled bombers arriving in Florida carried defectors from Castro's air force who had been strafing Cuban airfields.

Then the sickening fact dawned on him. Stevenson had not been informed. Those planes were decoys from Nicaragua. Stevenson was repeating, in good faith, the lies that Phillips had prepared.

George Bush was present at meetings when arms for hostages was discussed on Aug. 6, 1985, and Jan. 6 and 7, 1986. At these meetings Secretaries George Schultz and Caspar Weinberger expressed vehement disapproval of the project.

Did George Bush, like the gentlemanly Tracy Barnes, unwilling to be even a silent partner in Mrs. Warren's profession, leave the table? Was Bush, like Adlai Stevenson, the unwitting victim of CIA obscurantism?

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